

Knowing Your Roots

The History of Duxbury: John and Priscilla Alden - a love story

By Mary McKenzie
Clipper Reporter

As many family stories do, Alden family history starts with a love story. Except this story became world-famous poem that school children still study today and inspired a play and movies as well.

When young, single John Alden, a crewman for the Mayflower boat that brought the first wave of Pilgrims here in 1620, went to William Mullins on behalf of his recently widowed friend Myles Standish to ask for the right for Myles to court Mr. Mullins' daughter Priscilla, he did so because Standish felt awkward asking. Mullins told Alden he would have to ask Priscilla herself.

Alden may have been assigned to live with Standish and his first wife, Rose, when Plymouth Colony was first being settled and houses were in short supply, some accounts say. The two men had become friends. Priscilla Mullins' father died later that winter; his wife and Priscilla's mother, Alice and brother, Joseph, died before him, leaving Priscilla an orphan in February 1621, a mere three months after landing in Plymouth.

The story goes that as Alden was singing the praises of his friend Myles to Priscilla, she famously responded: "Speak for yourself, John Alden," to which Alden blushed, bowed and exited the house quickly. Soon after, a love affair began between the two, creating a love triangle memorialized in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1858 poem "The Courtship of Myles Standish." Longfellow was a descendant of two important Duxbury families, the Wadsworths and the Aldens. The story gave a romantic side to the Pilgrims and people loved it. The story had been handed down in the Alden family and was published in 1814 by great-great grandson, Rev. Timothy Alden. The Alden House Historic Site is located on St. George St.

Is it true? "There is no 17th century documentation for 'The Courtship' whatsoever," said U.S. Naval Academy professor and historian Thomas McCarthy. "There is a great deal of circumstantial evidence that John and Priscilla, each in their own way, was a prize catch. Priscilla came from a higher socioeconomic class, which entitled her to be picky.



The Alden family gathered for its 116th annual meeting in August.



A historical photo of an Alden family reunion shows the hundreds of descendants.

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"There is no way of knowing whether the Courtship story is true or not – but it does seem to be consistent with what we know or can reasonably infer about the two," McCarthy continued, "which makes it all the more intriguing."

The couple was married around 1623, the fourth marriage of the colony, and had 10 surviving children. They became one of the first families of Duxbury and much of their old farm land is now schools and a library, and of course the Alden House Historic Site. John and Priscilla had 69 grandchildren and 500 greatgrandchildren.

Alden kindred may be the most populous of any Mayflower descendants, with the exception of Howlands, but it is not established if the Howlands' lineage is tied to John Howland or three Howland brothers.

How Did They Get to Duxbury? In 1628, when the Aldens, like Myles Standish, became one of the "undertakers" to assume the debt for the colony to the London-based merchant company that financed them – called the Merchant Adventurers, the door was open to settling outside of Plymouth. That's when the Aldens settled in Duxbury, roughly 750 feet away from where the Alden House stands today. They settled into a 100-acre property.

Historian Dorothy Wentworth described the property as: "Some cleared upland where the Indians had planted, so woodlands and a long stretch of fresh and salt meadow where hay could be cut, there was a fresh water stream and at least one spring. It was a good farm."

According to the National Register of Historic Places registration, U.S. Department of Interior, John and Priscilla Alden's home (circa 1700) and homestead (circa 1630), owe their "prominence to the national cultural impact of 'the Courtship of Myles Standish.'"

"The desire of late 19th and early 20th-century Americans for a more human, family focused story about the cultural and historical origins of the United States quickly made The Courtship the most popular national origins story in American folklore," the registration states. "The public's embrace of The Courtship and its incorporation into American folklore made the surviving Alden House the most important physical site associated with John and Priscilla and a focus of ongoing national public interest, especially since descendants continued to live in and own the house. This property illustrates, in a highly visible way, a link between folklore and material culture."

Who Was John Alden? John Alden was born in 1589 and died in 1687. The crew had the option to return back to England, noted Duxbury Rural and Historical Society Drew Archives archivist Carolyn Ravenscroft, but Alden decided not to do so.

"Alden was someone who thought he could build a new, possibly better, life here," she noted. "(Plymouth Colony Governor William) Bradford makes the explicit point that Alden, who was hired to be the Mayflower's cooper, or barrel-maker at Southampton, was a 'free agent,'" said Alden historian Thomas McCarthy. "He could stay at Plymouth with the group if he wished or return to England. Bradford calls Alden a 'hopeful young man,' meaning that he was an optimistic person and Bradford suggests that the other settlers very much wanted him to stay, which he did. He rapidly became one of the colony's leaders, even while still in his twenties."

Alden worked as assistant to the governor of Plymouth Colony from 1633 to 1675. This high role in government may have been the reason for his arrest in 1634, during a fight between Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay Colony over a fur trading post in Maine. Alden did not take part, but was a high-ranking member of Plymouth Colony and was arrested and jailed in Boston. He was



The Alden House Historic Site is located on St. George Street

eventually released because of the efforts of Plymouth Colony Governor William Bradford. According to a National Parks Service biography on the Aldens and their property in Duxbury, "Alden held positions of high economic and political importance for almost the entire seventy-one year history of the Plymouth Colony (1620- 1691), a span of public service unrivaled in seventeenthcentury colonial America and perhaps in the entire colonial period. He served the colony in almost every available capacity save that of governor (although he served as deputy or acting governor on two occasions)." The thing that isn't said, but can be inferred, as historian McCarthy noted, is that Priscilla must have been running the farm while John was working in the leadership positions.

"Alden was frequently engaged in colony matters and away from home on this business," he said. "That meant Priscilla was head of family, head of household, and head of farm – fully in charge of all matters until John's return."

One has to wonder, on any given school day in Duxbury, if the Aldens could have possibly foreseen how many uses the town they helped found would have found for their land – which now features a museum in their name, a library, an elementary, middle and high school, a performing arts center, tennis courts and several athletic fields.